

Business & Farm

Soil tour gives officials look at area conservation efforts

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WATERLOO

Although any campaign mudslinging is still more than a year away, some local politicians found themselves deeply involved with dirt Wednesday.

The Black Hawk County Soil and Water Conservation District hosted a field tour of eight conservation projects cooperatively funded by federal and state dollars. Among those who attended were state Reps. Don Hanson, R-Waterloo, and Don Shultz, D-Waterloo, as well as Black Hawk County Board of Supervisors members Brian Quirk and Leon Mosley.

The tour included visits to farms using conservation practices such as hog and poultry manure management, wetlands restoration, grassed waterways, terraces, filter strips and tree planting.

"I'm fascinated by it. It's something we need to see and become aware of where the dollars we're committing go," Hanson said.

One recipient of those dollars was the first stop on the tour. This year, Jim and Craig Sage, a father and son team who operate Rainbow Farms on the north edge of Waterloo, received

\$4,600 in cost share dollars to install a double concrete basin hog manure management system.

Total cost of the project was \$10,750. For its contribution, the state wound up with a farm where runoff doesn't threaten the water supply. Furthermore, the system contains odors, eliminating potential conflict between the farm and its urban neighbors.

"In this day and age, people like to drive around and point their fingers at farming operations," Jim Sage said.

The farm, he said, also benefits from the three ways manure is recycled — spreading it on fields serves as fertilizer, erosion control, and sustenance for wildlife through undigested grain.

"This is a renewable resource," Sage said.

County conservation district chairwoman Jeanette Winegarden, who told legislators on the tour that districts would be requesting more conservation dollars this year, said there are multiple benefits of cost-share conservation.

While "agriculture is always a priority" in Iowa, whether the Legislature will be able to deliver more dollars depends on how the budget is hashed out in Des Moines, Hanson

said.

"Conservation always becomes a battle. How do we spend it, where do we put it?" he said. For example, the organic nutrient program from which the Sages received their money was allocated just \$900,000 for a two-year period.

Besides the state, Black Hawk County also has a financial interest in conservation. The county already provides about \$3,000 to the conservation district for its newsletter. More significant is the \$50,000 Quirk said the county plans to spend between fiscal years 1997 and '99 to map soils. It was last done about 25 years ago, and is one of several maps the county plans to make using aerial photographs taken this year.

The tour came the same day the Indiana-based Conservation Technology Information Center announced that Iowa leads the nation in no-till corn acreage, a popular conservation practice. Nearly 10 percent — 1.9 million acres of the 11.5 million total acres planted to corn in the state — were no-tilled in 1995.

The CTIC also said Iowa ranks third in the number of soybeans acres no-tilled, with 2.3 million. Nationwide, farmers left 40.9 million acres as no-till in 1995.